

Books/Richard Condon

BURIED TREASURE

"...After an eternity of backing and filling and padding, *Smiley's People* fulfills itself as a stark and moving novel..."

Smiley's People, by John le Carré.
Knopf, \$10.95.

The Master of Stasis has returned, driving his dense herd of auxiliary words to the glue factory. John le Carré is back again with the same novel as before. The magicians will come down from their garrets to signal with their lanterns that stasis in a spy "thriller" must indeed be literature, and they will be half-right.

Le Carré has to be an Olympic-class sprinter but not a distance runner. In those stretches of the novel which are the nub and reason for his story, he is brilliant. He is a gifted short-form writer who has decided that the longer form could be more rewarding. If the actors who have played Falstaff were ever padded the way le Carré pads his books, they could never get out of the dressing rooms. *Smiley's People* seems to me to have been meant to begin at what is now Chapter 11. Before that we have the same embarrassing fill as in the first 90-odd pages of *The Honourable Schoolboy*—the short-form writer, worried that his novel won't be long enough for the marketplace, shoring it up with over-written set pieces and other upholstery which could have been introduced in a dozen or so pages after the present Chapter 11 begins.

But le Carré's stories are not what they seem to be about. They are about a world inhabited entirely by registered masochists. Le Carré, never a barrel of laughs, gives us George Smiley, a barrel of pain. Smiley digs pain to the exclusion of everything else except cleaning his eyeglasses. His wife lives in a stately English home on the outskirts of Purgatory; his target, the villain of the piece, abides ecstatically in the pain of the ancient, icy northern hell called Nifflheim. His antagonists suffer just as much as his associates suffer, all of them gladly. The dankness of the

choice of five characters (the only ones capable of walking off the pages of this novel—Mme. Maria Ostrakova, Toby Esterhase, Mr. and Mrs. Anton Grigoriev, and the best-written insane woman since Ophelia) to celebrate the damply cold grottness of their chosen lives is oppressive while it is being experienced, but that is undoubtedly what makes le Carré's novels so popular with his readers, to whom the pleasure of universal pain is as a hobby.

It is possible that le Carré's novels are memorable because they are so repetitious. No writer of popular fiction today rings the changes on what seems to be every sentence in his set pieces in the way le Carré does. The way he repeats variations on the same sentence and even the same ideas begins the training of the reader into ultimate masochism because if one continues reading this sort of five-way anagram, whose answer is often meaningless, he has to be taking the same pleasure from pain as le Carré taught Smiley to do.

But when le Carré is not concerned with repetitions and obfuscations and his desperate requirement to overwrite, he is one helluva writer. It may be that readers bow their heads and take the punishment of le Carré's brutal fillers just to get past the set pieces and into the haunted places where his novels leave their sweaty footprints across the memory and where he has so few peers

writing in his genre today. When the writer's fears for the length of what he has written are finally behind him, when the last set piece, the final kapok of repetition has served his anxiety about what the marketplace will accept as the proper length, he takes off as a great artist into a narrative alive with living characters weaving the themes he knows best.

Smiley's People is a direct sequel to *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, a novel which had all the faults of this one and which also was filled with haunting, helpless, useless pain—which said, in essence, "I am you and you are me, and what have we done to each other." It was the *ultimate* spy story.

Smiley's People is the subtle, wearily sophisticated story of revenge, pure revenge, eternal revenge, the sweetest and most terrible of macho motions. Le Carré takes an eternity of backing and filling and faking and padding to get to it, but when he does *Smiley's People* fulfills itself as a stark and moving novel.

—R.C.

Richard Condon is the author of *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Winter Kills*, and *The Whisper of the Axe*. His most recent novel is *Death of a Politician*.